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SUBJECT: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF ADMIRAL YI

¶1. (U) Koreans on April 28 will celebrate the 262nd anniversary of Admiral Yi Sun-shin's birthday. Admiral Yi is remembered for inventing the "turtle ship" -- which was the world's first metal-armored warship -- his brilliance as a strategist and, most of all, for his 16th century victories against the Japanese navy. According to popular history, Yi won 23 major battles and sunk hundreds of Japanese warships, transports, and supply ships. His biggest achievement was the 1597 Battle of Myeongnyang, where Yi defeated 333 Japanese ships with only 13 of his own. Yi, struck down by a Japanese bullet, died in battle in 1598.

¶2. (U) South Koreans routinely pick Admiral Yi as their most admired historical figure. He has been the subject of two major motion pictures, several television dramas and countless books. His statue has pride of place in central Seoul. Resplendent in full battle armor, Admiral Yi stands day-after-day grasping his sword and scowling at oncoming traffic.

¶3. (U) To commemorate this year's anniversary, schoolchildren drew a huge mural which now hangs along Seoul's Chongyecheon Stream, one of the main venues for this weekend's "Hi Seoul Festival." The crayon-on-cloth illustration of sinking ships and drowning sailors stretches for over two city blocks. Although the doomed ships are mostly obscured by flames of Torch Red and Sunset Orange, the rising sun of the Japanese flag is clearly visible on each vessel and the drowning men all have the drawn-back hair of cartoon samurai. The carnage takes place in front of Admiral Yi's flotilla of turtle ships, which in the mural float triumphantly in halos of cannonfire. In addition to this display of artwork, Admiral Yi will be remembered throughout town with traditional music, turtle ship floats on parade, and recitals of poem and song.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: The enduring popularity of Admiral Yi is telling. He demonstrated to generations of Koreans that through innovation and determination, Korea is able to overcome a more powerful Japan. Whether it is through competition in the marketplace or brinkmanship in the East Sea (Sea of Japan), one can still see modern South Korea trying to reclaim Admiral Yi's glory. Japan has for centuries been Korea's rival and, at the same time, a model of what it would like to become. That Korean children so readily draw the slaughter of thousands of Japanese sailors -- and that Seoul chooses to display this chilling work in such a prominent location during its showcase festival -- is another indicator that this rivalry will last a long time, at least for South Koreans. END COMMENT.
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